

# Corui Chronicle

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## 2002 CROW DIE-OFF

### West Nile & New Disaster Sensitivity

John McGuire's account (appearing in this issue) of the decline of crow numbers in the St. Louis vicinity is substantively similar to others from, among other places, Kansas City, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, the Washington, D.C., area and Westchester County, N.Y. Virtually all of these reports are anecdotal which does not make them necessarily false but does leave room for speculative curiosity such as follows:

**CONSIDER THE SOURCE** – Most of the observations are from metropolitan areas. This is not surprising given the concentrations of crows and people who might watch them in these places. However it is puzzling that when rural residents have been asked to comment, they invariably report that there seem to be as many or more crows than there usually are in their areas. Assume that city and country people are peers so far as observation goes. Is the urban environment especially benign for crow-killing diseases? Does association with large numbers of people cause crows to be especially vulnerable to the West Nile virus or other afflictions?

**HABEAS CORPUS** – Observers conclude that a die-off is occurring because (1) they saw many fewer or no crows this summer, that populations of these birds seem to have declined by 50 percent to 70 percent; (2) they have found several dead crows, very rarely more than a dozen. By way of example, many such accounts have come from metropolitan Washington, D.C. Now this area is indeed good crow habitat since it is covered by a lush horticultural forest rich in natural

resources and garbage, which crows can exploit. Estimates of this sort are tricky but as a conservative guess there are probably 150,000 year-round crow residents of the area. If half or even 10 percent of them passed on this last summer, piles of rotting crow carcasses would have littered the streets of the Capital. Even there where the human body count is high and corruption common this would have been the sort of event calculated to cause Congressional investigation, reactions from the White House and Homeland Security sleuths. In summary: crows who do, die at home, so to speak. Among them there are no equivalents of what was once thought to be elephant graveyards. If there had been a massive die off of these birds in urban areas this past summer their corpses would have been very noticeable and accumulated faster than carrion beetles, raccoons and street cleaners could dispose of them.

**CONSIDER THE SEASON** – Loud and bold at other times, crows become rather silent and secretive during the summer when they are hatching and rearing chicks. In contrast from mid-fall until early spring most crows in the middle latitudes of this country gather in big (up to several hundred thousand birds) flocks. So congregated, they roost together at night in thickety, bushy areas, fan out in the morning to forage and



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#### ST. LOUIS AND MISSOURI CROW NUMBERS

### *Caw of the wild is slowly returning*

By John M. McGuire  
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH  
Nov. 5, 2002

*"If men had wings and black feathers,  
few of them would be clever enough to  
be crows."*

The Rev. Henry Ward Beecher said this back in the 19th century. And it's certainly appropriate today given that these adroit birds – once highly visible – have largely disappeared, at least throughout much of the St. Louis area. Beecher was the favorite sibling of Harriett Beecher Stowe, author of

"Uncle Tom's Cabin." Obviously he was fond of these quick-witted corvids.

A story in the Everyday section Oct. 15 detailed the disappearance of crows and other birds afflicted by the West Nile virus. *Science* magazine had estimated more than 100,000 crows died of the virus over the summer and in early fall.

Now, the question is, are crows beginning to reappear here? There are those out in the central Ozarks who say they have seen more crows in these rural areas than they have ever seen before.

But local bird experts say the death and disappearance of these crows and bluejays, great horned owls and raptors such as red-tailed hawks, have largely happened in urban areas and the surrounding territory.

"I know the crows have picked up somewhat in town here," said Randy Korotev, a Washington University geochemist who has spent 23 years doing feathered census reports. He looks for various species in the Kennedy Forest on the edge of Forest Park.

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Crow Die-off Continued from page 1

## Could urban crow trend be reversing?

return to the same roosting site at night. Given the lack of foliage and numbers of birds involved, these flocks are very visible, aerial streams and rivers of crows flowing along for much the same purpose and at much the same time of day as human commuters. Again in summary: in considering the abundance or lack of crows this July should be compared to previous ones, not to this past March or January. Suggestively, in John McGuire's report of Nov. 5, several of his correspondents thought they were beginning to see more crows than they had in the summer. In the Washington, D.C., area there are six winter roosting sites that have been used for some years by crows and have been regularly watched by members of ASCAR; as of December 2002 all of these sites are occupied by winter flocks in which crows seem as numerous as usual.

**WEST NILE – MATTER OF FACT I:** Formal necropsies indicate that throughout the nation some crows have been infected by the West Nile virus.

**MATTER OF FACT II:** The print and electronic media is infatuated with disaster and crisis, potential as well as on-going; is eager to provide dire prophecy and grim warning. Thus as an actual threat to the general public health, the West Nile virus so far ranks well below bathtub slippage and French-fried potatoes. Nevertheless news professionals have elevated this affliction to the already, or soon-to-be, catastrophic disaster category.

In consequence upon observing – accurately or otherwise –

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that there seem to be fewer crows in their neighborhoods and finding several dead ones during the course of the summer, many have concluded that the general crow population has been decimated by the West Nile epidemic. Perhaps – but other possibilities are at least as plausible and interesting.

The number of crows has not significantly declined but because of rampant NDS (New Disaster Sensitivity) our powers of observation, analysis and interpretation have.

Throughout the 20th century, crows have become increasingly urbanized. For essentially the same reasons that members of our species have, these birds have relocated in cities which provide more material opportunity and possibly seemed more interesting than the countryside. But things change and perhaps among crows this trend is now being reversed. Rather than dying in urban areas they are leaving them because of excessive competition for nesting sites and foraging territories; because of an instinctive recognition that dense populations of their own kind cause debilitating social stress, increase the risk of contracting mental and physical diseases. –  
*Corvi 94*

*Corvi 94 is a resident of rural Pennsylvania where he reports there has been no noticeable decline in crow numbers. However he often visits Washington, D.C.; Baltimore, Md.; and other established centers of crow and human population.*

*No ecological bigot he, #94 claims to be without environmental bias.*

ST. LOUIS AND MISSOURI CROW NUMBERS continued from page 1

### 'Corvids are very resilient'

"Last Sunday, in the riverlands area near Portage des Sioux, a friend saw at least 100 crows. And bluejays started coming back in the third week of September; they're migratory, he said.

"Recently, within this area, I've had four or five sightings of one or two crows. I've heard the same thing happened in Chicago; they've virtually disappeared in urban areas. I've been getting as many as 50 e-mails a day discussing what they've seen. Many didn't seem to understand what we were talking

about, although I've heard there were a lot of dead crows around Kansas City."

Walter Crawford, executive director of the World Bird Sanctuary near Valley Park, said he's still seeing a problem with afflicted birds. He estimates that as many as 70 percent of the crows in this area have died from the virus. "The urban places and surrounding areas have been devastated," he said.

"I don't know what the situation is like in areas away from this region, but people I talk to in Indiana and Ohio and

surrounding states have seen a tremendous decline in these birds. I was out last night in the woods making calls for birds, and I only got one response. I usually get three or four or five answering me. But I'm sure there are places where the local bird population has been spared."

Eventually, Crawford expects the crows to return to the area in large numbers because these corvids are "very resilient."

*Continued on next page*



ST. LOUIS AND MISSOURI CROW NUMBERS *continued from page 2*

## More crows in central Ozarks than previous years

Karin Lindahl of Kirkwood mailed Beecher's quote to the Post-Dispatch along with other information about these birds threatened by the mosquito-borne virus. She loves birds and animals, and until recently, hadn't seen a crow since one "died in my hands in August."

"I looked in awe at her strong wings that had carried her so high and the radiant colors that reflected the sun, and in horror at her clenched feet and beak," she wrote. "Her death, like the others, was long and agonized. My whispered, 'I'm so sorry,' did not begin to reflect my own despair and helplessness."

In another letter she included a color photograph of a dying bluejay, stricken, she was certain, by the virus. The sickly corvid landed on a water dish in her front yard and died, not long after the photo was taken.

These days, she sees things somewhat differently: "Bluejays, we have lots of them back now; I heard them this morning. They tend to like to be together." Lindahl loves to count birds. The other day, she saw 59 flying over her mother's house near Kirkwood High School.

Lindahl's letters were just a few of the

dozen or so e-mails, letters and calls received after the first crow story.

"Thanks for filling us in on what happened to the crows ('The summer the chirping stopped')," said Alice Butler, who works in the department of anatomy and neurobiology at the Washington University School of Medicine.

Normally, huge flocks hang around the parking lots near the medical school, but not this year, she said.

"Most people who park around here consider them a huge nuisance. So I was worried that the city had done something stupid and poisoned them all.

Unfortunately, it looks like nature has done the job for them."

Another theory suggests the appearance — or disappearance — of crows has to do with geography. Bird observers in other parts of Missouri and Illinois say they're there in large numbers. Perhaps a significant number flew away from here because this deadly epidemic was so focused in the St. Louis area.

Crows are all over the place, said Larry DeClue, who lives in Indian Hills Lake eight miles northwest of Cuba, Mo. He works at Fort Leonard Wood and hunts in Texas County, south of the Army base.

"If anything, I feel there are more crows around this year in the central Ozarks than I have ever seen before," said DeClue. "Crows are about the first birds working just after day-break, and among the last to roost. I saw numerous groups around my home, work and hunting sites, between 10 to 24 birds.

"If the state population of crows is down, it must be in urban areas, because there are lots of them in rural areas. I know there have been cases of West Nile out there because my son, a Phelps county deputy health officer, told me he has picked up several dead birds for testing at the state lab in Jefferson City."

### ASCAR Pillar of Society awardee

## Meet John McGuire

**J**ohn McGuire is an award-winning and rewarding essayist/journalist employed by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. In the fall of 2002 he published several insightful accounts concerning the supposed dramatic decline of crow populations in the St. Louis area. The first of these appeared in the Oct. 15 issue of the Post-Dispatch; the second — following reflection by McGuire and his readers — on Nov. 5. The "crow die-off" — frequently attributed to massive fatalities caused by the West Nile virus — has been observed in other areas and reported by many print and electronic news organizations. However, McGuire's article of Nov. 5 is by far the most sensible and stylish of these reports and therefore is

reprinted in this issue of the Chronicle.

As a personal note: John McGuire is a long-time member of ASCAR and has thrice received (the first in 1951) the coveted Pillar of the Society award. He has also served as Corresponding Secretary of the American Wool Gatherers Association and collects old saws. Exculpatory by temperament and education, McGuire recognizes the importance of appearance and usually dresses but says he is not wardrobe driven. He has several relatives and acquaintances and an inordinate fondness for cream of carp bisque, a taste he acquired while maturing without travail in Kalamazoo County, Michigan. Currently his favorite color is umber.

**A**SCAR now numbers — so think some who enjoy counting things — about 1,000 members. Alphabetically and in terms of interests and attitudes members range — an expression — from academics to Zoroastrians. But only the Editor and an associate minion know who and where they all are. This is in keeping with the Corvi Privacy Act that forbids those who know from talking about or to other corvis or using their names and addresses in the Chronicle without permission. The CPA is occa-

sionally tested by purveyors of crow curios wanting access to mailing lists.

However, because many members have similar interests and have indicated a desire to make the acquaintance of others who share them, some thought has been given to adjusting the CPA to

## Privacy act

accommodate these wishes. Therefore anyone who would like to hear from other corvi should send along their name and address to the editor. These will be published *occasionally* in the Chronicle. Names are not absolutely necessary — Corvi numbers will do — but addresses are. Obviously those who wish to remain known only to the editor and her associate minion should do nothing and will continue to enjoy the protection of CPA.





## THE TALK OF THE ROOST

### DIRECTOR'S CHOICE AWARD

The Director's Choice trophy is awarded annually for confidential reasons by the Board of ASCAR. The 2002 recipient is Patricia Chase of St. Louis, Mo. Chase's nomination for the award was received on 14/11/02 giving her "Golden Nine" status. Chase has been recognized as an Under Umber fellow. Other personal data is no longer available due to several unfortunate clerical errors. Readers may rest assured that the erring clerics have been identified and severely corrected.

### SIR WILLIAM ON CROWS

Florida Jay (a corvi who prefers a name rather than a number) offers the following on crows.

While Audubon deservedly receives credit for characterizing the birds of North America, another naturalist was at work in England. William Swainson in his travels drew colored illustrations of the birds he encountered and wrote of their characteristics. Swainson was fascinated by crows and thought in the evolutionary process as man descended the tree of life unparalleled in his accomplishments, the crow in another branch equaled man in his achievements.

In both species, the ability to adapt, [to] copy that which had been proven useful by other animals, and to advance its culture is without equal. Here is what Swainson wrote about the crow:

"The crow, unites in itself a greater

number of properties than are to be found individually in any other genus of birds; as if in fact it had taken from all the other orders a portion of their peculiar qualities, for the purpose of exhibiting in what manner they could be combined. From the rapacious birds this "type of types" as the crow has been justly called, takes the power of soaring in the air, and seizing upon living birds, like the hawks, while its habit of devouring putrid substances, and picking out the eyes of young animals, is borrowed from the vultures. From the scansorial or climbing order it takes the faculty of picking the ground, and discovering its food when hidden from the eye, while the parrot family gives it the taste for vegetable food, and furnishes it with great cunning, sagacity, and powers of imitation, even to counterfeiting the human voice.

Next come the order of waders, who impart their quota to the perfection of the crow by giving it great powers of flight, and perfect facility in walking, such being among the chief attributes of the suctorial order.

Lastly, the aquatic birds contribute their portion, by giving this terrestrial bird the power of feeding not only on fish, which are their peculiar food, but actually of occasionally catching it. (Wilson's American Ornithology, Fishing Crow) In this wonderful manner do we find the crow partially invested with the united properties of other birds, while in its own order, that of the incessores or perchers, it stands the pre-eminent type.

We cannot also fail to regard it as a remarkable proof of the superior organization and character of the corvidae, that they are adapted for all climates, and accordingly are found all over the world."

*Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation.* Robert Chambers, 1844, Chambers, London, Reprinted and Edited by James A Second, The University of Chicago Press, 1994. pp 269-271.

Chambers cited the following reference - On the natural history and classification of birds, Swainson, W.: 1837, Vol. II, Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green & Longman, London.

Not a lot is known about Sir William Jardine Swainson other than that he was a respected naturalist in his day.

*Appleton's Encyclopedia* notes that Swainson [1789-1855] was born in Liverpool, England, and died in New Zealand. Following service in the British army, 1807-15, which included a short stint in South America, he returned to London and devoted himself to studying natural history. He moved to New Zealand in 1841, where he published works on the natural history and on the social and political conditions of New Zealand and Tasmania. His books include *Ornithological Drawings of Birds from Mexico and Brazil* (1831-'41).

### BAT MANIA

I have been looking over your website and want to compliment you on the great content. I guess I never thought

*Continued on page 5*



## TALK *continued*

enough about crows to realize what interesting birds they really are.

I had an experience on Halloween and wanted to tell someone who would care. My husband hung a couple of battery-operated flying bats on a line that was stretched from a big tree to the house. Crows often roost in that tree. The minute my husband got those bats flying around, the local crows starting going crazy. Suddenly, literally hundreds of crows came in from all directions and started circling and cawing above the area where the fake bats were flying. The sky was a swirling blackness and the noise was deafening! Neighbors actually came out of their houses to see what the ruckus was. A few of the crows began dive-bombing the bats until we finally decided to take the bats down and wait until dark to put them back up.

Within a few minutes, every crow had disappeared, even the few that were there to begin with. We were all amazed and actually a little freaked out about what happened (you know, that movie "The Birds"...)

Anyway, I just wanted to tell someone who might be interested to hear this story. Crows really are something!- *Corvi 1010, Riverside, Calif.*

### SNOW SLIDE

I was hiking alone one warm spring morning along a bare ridgeline high above Ketchikan, Alaska. The place is a favorite of the region's most treasured critter, the raven. They are frequently there, above the ridgeline riding the air currents often in seeming aerobic competition. A good show by a troop of aerial showoffs gives me a feeling of what it must be like to fly, well, very well -- like a really skilled whitewater kayaker plays in his environment of choice.

Although the wind was streaming at right angles to the ridge generating what must have been a great, invisible to us, standing wave to play on -- none of my buddies were up there surfing, doing enders, rolling up or the like.

OK, I thought, it's not their job to entertain me, and I started rambling on toward Beaver Falls, my destination. In a few steps I heard them, Grraaaking and generally making noises that they have

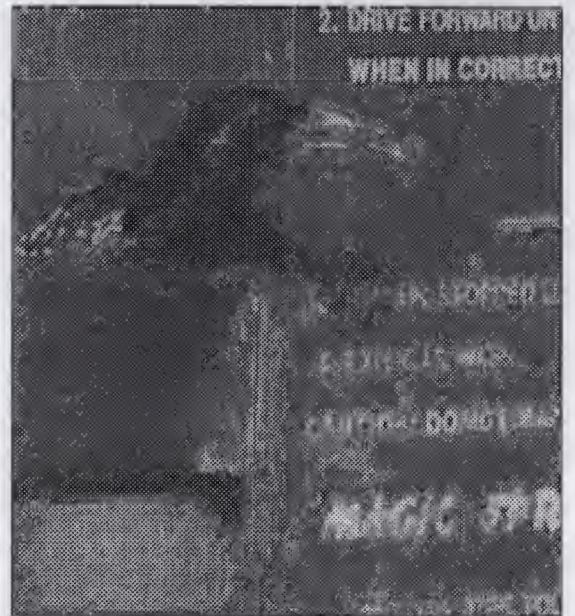
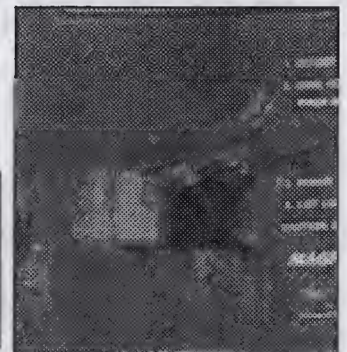
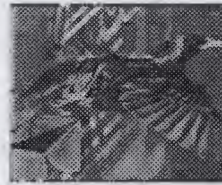
## Bird-in of Proof

We received an emailed story whose origins were missing, but it included these photographs to illustrate an amazing tale that may be circulating on the internet. The email reports a car wash caper in Frederick, Md.

The owner of a newly installed car wash system was losing money from the coin machine and took the manufacturer-installer to task. The new owner accused the manufacturer of having untrustworthy employees who likely had a key to the newly installed coin changer and were helping themselves after hours.

The manufacturer, according to the emailed tale, had faith in his employees and focused a remote camera on the coin changer to catch a thief! The photos, in fact, indicated more than a one-bird caper. The manufacturer said several birds worked together to "steal" coins from the machine.

The manufacturer and car wash owner then checked the roof of the car wash and found \$4000. Since the email message didn't include any decimal points in the amount of cash found, the Chronicle editor wonders if the amount



might have been \$40 or \$400. More money, according to the message, was found under a nearby tree (we assume above ground).

The email message may be missing a few facts -- and may not be a crow --but the pictures seem authentic.

taught me to associate with them at play. Yet there wasn't a single black bird in the air.

Rounding a knoll, I saw a group of 15 or more ravens; most of them at the top of a long strand of late spring snow remaining in a north-facing gully. One by one, they were taking turns sliding down the slope, tumbling and grrraaaking the entire 130-foot distance. Once at the bottom, they'd shake their ruffled feathers back into raven form and fly back to the top to wait their turn for another plunge. - *Corvi 59, Seattle, Wash.*

### LATEST FLAP

Science magazine (Jan. 17) reports a new study on origins of flight in birds that suggests feathered

dinosaurs may have begun flapping their wings to help propel them up inclines to climb trees or rocks -- putting them at heights to discover, eventually, wings could allow them to fly.

Kenneth P. Dial at the University of Montana, began a study after his son, Terry, studying the development of flight in chukar partridge chicks, complained that the chicks cheated. Rather than attempting to fly above haybales that Terry had used as obstacles, the chicks ran up the sides of the bales. Curious about "cheating" chicks, dad looked more closely at his son's work and began thinking new thoughts about the origins of flight.



# ROOST NOTES

## White raven sightings

Tim Mowry, reporter for the Fairbanks (Alaska) Daily News-Miner kindly gave us permission to reprint his Nov. 1, 2002, story on white raven sightings in Fairbanks this fall.

BY TIM MOWRY

FAIRBANKS DAILY NEWS-MINER

**W**hen people call the Alaska Bird Observatory to report that they just saw a white raven, they have a hard time believing it themselves.

"They usually start out by saying, 'Tell me I just saw a white raven,'" said Nancy DeWitt. "I think people are pretty surprised to see one and they should be."

Judging from several recent sightings around town, it appears the white raven that has been seen in Fairbanks the last three winters has returned for another winter of foraging in the Golden Heart City.

Sevin Bullwinkle saw the bird on Sunday outside her house on Lathrop Street and snapped a picture to prove it.

"I just came out of the house and it was sitting on the ground," said Bullwinkle, who just so happens to live a block from a Dumpster. "I'm a fanatic about ravens and seeing a white one was pretty exciting. I had never heard of one."

While there is no way to prove it is the same bird, white ravens are so rare that the chances of it being a different one are slim.

In past years the bird was frequently seen in the vicinity of Goldhill Road and Sheep Creek Road on the western edge of Fairbanks while this year it has been spotted in several spots around town. It has been seen almost exclusively during the winter months – May is the latest reported sighting – when ravens move into Fairbanks to take advantage of the winter food

supply.

The bird acts like any other raven, scavenging from Dumpsters around town and feasting on anything it can find to eat, from French fries in parking lots to dead animals on the side of the road.

Art Purdy saw what was almost surely the same bird as Bullwinkle a few weeks earlier in the parking lot of Arctic Bowl on Cowles Street, just a few blocks from Bullwinkle's house.

"It was eating out of a McDonald's bag," reported Purdy, who raced to his mother's house to get her so she could see it.

The raven is more of a cream or ashy gray color than it is white, said Dan Gibson, curator of ornithology for the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

"White is an exaggeration," said Gibson, who has seen the bird several times. But, he said, "Next to a normal raven it's a strikingly different bird."

The museum has just one white raven in its [specimen] collection of more than 18,000 ravens collected from around the state. The lone specimen is a bird that was found on Steele Creek Road in Fairbanks in 1952.

The white raven in Fairbanks is not an albino but is referred to as a "leucistic," which means it has less than normal pigmentation that results in a pale or washed out appearance. Albino birds lack any kind of pigmentation and have red eyes.

Biologist John Wright, who is the birdbrain at the Alaska Department of Fish and Game in Fairbanks, said the bird first showed up in Fairbanks three years ago and has been seen in

*Continued on next page*

## WANTED: roost hunters

**A**SCAR has a continuing interest in crow demographics. Therefore members and friends are urged, without coercion, to send along information about the location and nature of winter roosts in their areas. For those not familiar with them, large flocks (sometimes numbering tens of thousands of individuals) gather in the fall and stay together until late March. Birds in these flocks, roost together each night in the same place, usually one in which there are dense stands of smallish trees and underbrush. Each morning the crows leave these sites and, in smaller groups, forage during the day. They reassemble and return to the roost at about sundown. During these morning and afternoon "drive times" squadrons of crows overhead are very observable.

Our request is: Let us know – by mail with a return address – if you know of a place where it seems at least a hundred or so crows roost at night; or if you observe sizeable flocks of crows over flying approximately the same places in the morning and afternoon. As to the type and amount of information: "Roost is located in Flat County, Missouri, on the west side of U.S. Highway #00 about two miles south of the East Sawed

Log city limits. Site is on several as yet undeveloped acres adjacent to the Jesse James shopping mall, directly behind a Pizza Hut. It is heavily covered with briars, 20- to 30-foot tall locust and cedar. As a guess it is occupied at night by (200 to 500, 10,000 to 15,000) crows."

If you have precise coordinates – degree, minute, second – for the location this is very helpful but if not, just use local landmarks. Estimates about numbers can seldom be precise. Any roosting sites or flocks which seem to contain more than a 100 birds are of interest. As to the flocks: "I often see a number of crows flying over my (house, office building, commuting route) at about 7:30 in the morning and again at 4:30 p.m. The location of the place where I often see them is .....

Crow roosts are thought provoking. Finding and watching them provides wholesome outdoor recreation, and is intellectually stimulating. Reporting them is a good and useful deed performed to the benefit of this Society.

Thanks and *Non soli sumus* — the ASCAR BUREAU OF ROOSTING AFFAIRS



ROOST NOTES *continued**Fairbanks white raven; Monroe, Wash., crows*

Town every winter since. The agency gets several phone calls from white raven observers each year, though the volume of calls isn't what it was when the bird first showed up.

"Most people who call in already know what it is," Wright said.

Wright saw the white raven fly over Creamer's Field just last week heading north with another raven. He described the bird as "dirty, dishwasher gray."

"When you first see it you don't think it's a raven because being black is an important part of being a raven," said Wright. "Your first impression is that it's a strange-looking gyrfalcon. If you get to see it long enough you figure it out."

Mark Ross, an avid bird watcher and education coordinator for Fish and Game, has seen the white raven three times.

"The first one I saw I thought it was an adult goshawk," said Ross. "It was ashy gray like the underneath of a goshawk."

Wright has seen several photos of the white raven but none of the pictures has been good, he said, in part because the bird blends in with its background, which is usually snow.

"I didn't have my good camera, I was so bummed," said Bullwinkle, who followed the bird in a pickup truck to get a better look at it. "I wish I had a better picture because it would be hanging on the wall if I did."

Artist Sandy Jamieson attempted to get a photo of the white raven two springs ago so he could paint a picture of the bird. The bird was a regular visitor to Jamieson's house in Ester and the artist borrowed a camera...to get a photo.

"When I didn't have a camera the raven would land in the yard every day," he said. "As soon as I got the camera the raven quit landing."

Jamieson spent three days trying to get a picture of the bird, concealing himself more each day. The bird finally landed on the third day, but took off before he could get a picture.

"That's the last time I saw it at my house," said Jamieson, who saw the bird again this spring near Spenard Builders Supply on Phillips Field Road.

Many of the people who call the bird observatory to report seeing the white raven say that [it] is being harassed by other ravens, though several other people have seen the bird in the friendly company of black ravens.

"The reports I get are always the same," said DeWitt.

"Everyone always says it's getting picked on by other (ravens).

"I'd be interested in finding out if he's able to find a mate," she said.



**FIND THE WHITE RAVEN.** Not easily photographed in a snowy landscape, Sevin Bullwinkle got this snapshot of the white raven sighted by several Fairbanks, Alaska, residents this fall.

**HIGH-WIRE ACT**

A couple of email messages on crow behaviors sent by Corvi 88, Seattle, Wash.

I once spent a winter studying crow behavior as a project in college.

Crows do some really interesting things if you watch them. I got to see a crow once fiddling with a stick, as another one watched, perched on a wire.

It passed the stick from bill to feet several times, and then hopped in the air and flung the stick up and tried catching it in its beak! It missed, picked up the stick and to my astonishment, after fiddling with the stick, did it again, this time catching the stick! It flew up in the air about 20 feet and did a flying somersault and transferred the stick

from bill to foot in the process, then returned to the ground, passing the stick from foot to bill. At this point there were six bystanders who had stopped to watch this crow. After 10 minutes of this fiddling, including a few more tosses in the air, but no catches, it carefully bowed and deposited the stick on the ground and walked away, every once and a while peering back over its shoulder as if to see if the other crow would pick up the stick. It did not, at least while I was watching. The perched one flew off instead, and the crow who had been fiddling with the stick followed it.

I have seen mutual preening as you describe several times, plus all kinds of other interesting bows, tilts, and rocking behaviors. Once you start paying attention to crows, you will never be bored. I have long assumed these behaviors were all related to mate selection, but I heard a talk from a crow expert who said that siblings often play together, long after leaving the nest, especially in their first year.

A couple months ago, in the parking lot of a fast food place in Monroe, I sat and watched a lady feeding French fries out her window to two crows standing idly by. In less than 60 seconds, from out of nowhere, 22 other crows had descended. There were several reorganizations of the positions of the crows relative to the lady with the French fries. The "best" positions were held by a trio which all the other crows stayed a respectful 12 to 14 inches or so away from. Then two gulls showed up and the crows rearranged themselves yet again, this time giving even more distance between them and the gulls, who took up the best position. The French fry benefactor apparently did not like gulls as much as crows and stopped her donations. I imagine this hierarchy has been well established in the dumpsters around town.

*Continued on next page*



## Caw Caw Caw

Dear Staff members,

I read somewhere that my animal totem pole is the raven and/or the crow.

A friend told me that all this clatter that the crows keep up in my back yard means they are trying to tell me something. How does one interpret crow language?

Each summer I am revisited by five to 10 boarders. Although they do not hesitate to run other birds away from the feeder, they do not seem to be very friendly towards me either.

One crow keeps up a constant noise all day – really neurotic like. Is he trying to tell me something? – *Corvi 958, Indianapolis, Ind.*

## The quick and the dead

Gentlecorvi:

I have come upon that blissful pass of imbibing No. 2'02, now and I am haunted by the numena of the concrete realities of life, like checkbooks.

Road kill has always been high on my list of interests, so I was pleased to see *Corvus 64's* contribution. First, I must observe that crows sometimes do manage to wind up as road kill themselves, a less lethal encounter, of the automobile kind, being reported above it in *Corvus 114's* clipping.

Crows, as has often been noted in your pages, are smart, quick and capable of flying. These advantages, and their natural instinct to remove themselves from danger, go a long way towards explaining



Illustration by Jim Haynes

## Letters

why crows so seldom join their gourmet meals on the blacktop, in spite of considerable bravado and statistical exposure. Crows are near, if not at, the apex of an evolutionary trend, in the direction, generally (anomalies, such as presidents, have been reported in the higher primates) of intelligence and quickness. Hundreds of millions of years represent the crow's climb through the ranks of reptiles and dinosaurs, though we have removed them taxonomically into the birds.

Evolution sometimes produces successful designs near the beginnings, such as the shark, turtle, cockroach, and yes the opossum. While successful, these types are not what we would call smart or quick. In this grouping, those that interact with the automobile, are over-represented in the road kill category. The opossum is a slow dimwitted creature. For him flight is not a successful strategy in the wild. His instincts are to either stand and fight, or play dead, neither of which is particularly advantageous when in the path of a motor vehicle.

While it does not seem likely that evolution is going to go back to the drawing

board and redesign the opossum, turtle and cockroach, it is my prediction that these types will survive, at least longer than our enthusiasm for paving over the entire land area of this world, and the automobile. – *Corvi 171, Georgetown, Conn.*

## What would a crow think?

Dear #29,

One of the most delightful characteristics of crows is that they are not interested in current events. After the excellent article on weaning, it was very disappointing to be confronted by "Questions a crow might pose."

Who needs this drivel? Certainly not me or the Chronicle. Let's stick to articles concerning things crows really think about like road kill, roosts, and well, like, dumpsters. Thanks.-- *Corvi 244, Great Falls, Va.*

P.O. Please keep up all of your good work.

## Turkey trot

We live in the Midwest and maintain our own 185-acre nature preserve. We have lots of wild life including many wild turkeys. Our dog is getting old, bored and tired of chasing the turkeys.

We have a number of crows that reside here that enjoy the birdseed that falls on the ground. The wild turkeys have been getting brave since the dog isn't bothering with them and have been feeding in

*Continued on next page*

## ROOST NOTES *continued from page 7*

# Do crows alert one another to new food sources?

Another *Corvi* wrote to Tweeters:

I saw ...this happen ...when a bag of garbage fell off the back of a truck going around a corner. Three crows were on it immediately; after four minutes, there were more than 60. Crows frequently perch atop lamp posts and other high places in Monroe. I have often wondered if, after [reading] the book *Ravens in Winter*, crows mutually alert each other on purpose to a new food source, or if they just opportunistically follow the flocking behavior?

Somebody once left a bag of dry dog food on the bottom of a shopping cart at the shopping center. Within five minutes the bag was open and all over the parking lot and it was a riot of gulls and crows swarming and squabbling over it. There were more than 100 birds in the mix and they formed such a scary

assemblage that somebody actually called the cops, who drove up in to the fray, got out as the birds moved back, then both cops broke out laughing and got back into their car, backing up and parking and keeping an eye on the scene as the riot of birds began again. I brought my class out to watch, but all that was left was the empty bag by the time we got there. For the next month, a pair of crows would frequently fly down off the lamp posts and examine the shopping carts left in the parking lot.

Crows are cool. I really hope they can weather this West Nile threat. It would be a much poorer world without crows in it.

<<http://www.nonprofitpages.com/nica/SVE.htm>>

Field skills training for student naturalists

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the area of the birdseed. The other evening about 25 turkeys were busy eating, and three crows entered the back yard. Two of the crows set up in the tree and pumped up their feathers while making raucous calls to the turkeys. Another crow on the ground strutted across the yard with an authoritative manner towards the turkeys, his head held high. One of the crows in the tree continued his loud caw-caw. The other flew down and dive-bombed the turkeys.

Repeating this maneuver a few times, each crow doing his individual activity, the turkeys started to leave, retreating into the woods. The crows continued their team effort until the turkeys were out of the area. We have observed this team play twice and both times the crows have been successful in protecting their dining area. — *Corvi 123, Kalamazoo, Mich.*

### Campus chorus

Good sir,

The funniest thing I have ever seen is a crow with his head stuck inside a bag of chips. We have a wily bunch here on capital hill in Seattle. One of the favorite haunts is all around Dick's — a popular hamburger stand — where many a crow's appetite is satiated.

I was walking to a book signing across the UW campus at dusk and heard many crows calling. I followed the racket between the trees in autumn and found a couple hundred crows grouped on the ground just standing there, when suddenly all took off. — *Corvi 76, Seattle.*

### Sprinkler

Thus far there has been no sign of West Nile problems in the NW. All mode of corvi are safe — bluejays, crows and ravens. We enjoyed watching/assisting (of

## Letters

*continued*

sorts) the raising of a young-en. The family visited our yard daily throughout the summer months. The mother was overly solicitous of her child and the father was extremely cautious as the babe bathed in our sprinkler one day with us pruning bushes a few feet away. It has been a good year. — *Corvi 9007, Rathell, Wash.*

### Cornbread

Hello friends of ASCAR:

We have had a rather wet summer here in north Texas, which has helped produce a bumper crop of acorns, much to the delight of crows and squirrels.

I thought I was going to lose one of the crows that greets me on my daily walk. He limped noticeably and refused to fly more than 45 or 50 feet. I provided him with corn and on occasion cornbread. After two weeks of convalescence, he decided it was time to test his strength and rose to the top of an oak where he announced to his friends and relatives that he had made full recovery. I was pleased. Best wishes to one and all. — *Corvi 16, Hurst, Texas*

### Go with the flow

Hi Fellow Corvus,

I want to share crow experiences I enjoyed with my fellow corvus. I find crows endlessly fascinating. Thank you for the interesting articles in "Corvi Chronicle." I especially like to read about how intelligent and curious crows are (curiosity goes with intelligence). I believe that our large California Sea Gulls are quite intelligent as well for they

are extremely curious and comical.

There is a three-tiered round water fountain right outside my office window. I have observed on a number of occasions the comical yet serious bathing habits of sophisticated city crows. I'm usually alerted to their presence by raucous cawing.

The top tier of the fountain is where the water spouts out like a pygmy geyser of about 3 to 4 inches in height. The water then falls to the second tier and finally into the bottom pool. Local crows love to bathe there. I saw a crow position himself right on top of the waterspout like king of the roost. He changed positions several times to get a good bath and almost fell in. Crows usually stand underneath the falling water on lower tiers as if taking a shower and let the water flow over their heads and backs (and no, they don't wash under their wings).

Sometimes there's competition for the fountain when a crow chases would-be fellow bathers away to keep the fountain to himself. Mostly though, several will bathe together on various tiers, jumping from one side to the other and sometimes dunking themselves. It's comical to watch the reactions of a crow that gets into deeper water than he expected. He exits hastily and perches on the fountain edge, ruffling his feather indignantly.

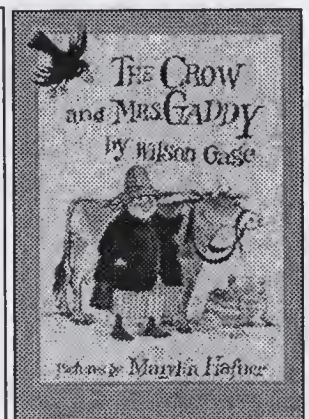
If a car or human happens by the fountain, a soggy crow swiftly takes to the air, lands atop the nearby parking structure, and then shakes himself dry. Sometimes the crow returns to the fountain when it's safe from intruders. They're a joy to behold! — *Corvi Cassandra, Torrance, Calif.*

## BOOK

### *Crow tale rates lots of stars (and garters!)*

**C**orvi Prefect, Mound, Minn., sent us a copy of "The Crow and Mrs. Gaddy" by Wilson Gage and illustrated by Marylin Hafner, first published in 1984 by Greenwillow books, a division of William Morrow & Company, Inc. The copy we received was published by Scholastic, Inc., Lucky Star series for young readers.

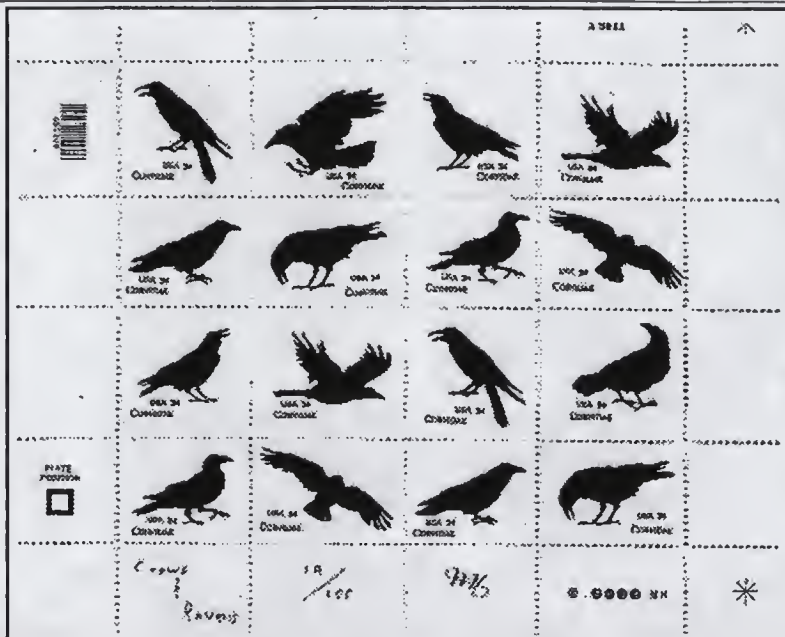
A delightful tale, endearingly illustrated, of an old woman, Mrs. Gaddy, and a young crow who spend a summer trying to outwit each other. Mrs. Gaddy, who is given to exclaiming "Oh, my stars and garters!" realizes her garden and household have grown untidy because she spends her all time planning to trick the crow. The crow is too busy playing tricks on Mrs. Gaddy to find himself a mate that summer.





# Stamps of approval *crows inspire designer*

Fall has come to the Northwest. The trees are getting some color as the sky is losing some, and the crows are beginning to roost again. Last year at this time I lived in a kind of staging area. In the afternoons, the trees in my neighborhood would fill with crows, sometimes waiting quietly, sometimes making an unbelievable racket. Just before it begins to get dark, they fly off to the arboretum for the night. I don't know how many people know that crows gather at night in the fall and winter, but its no secret if you're paying attention. Every day at dusk, anywhere in the city, you can see the crows heading for the same spot. Oddly, I've never gone down there



at night, but a friend said it's a sight to behold.

In honor of my favorite birds, I've made a set of stamps. Just in case there is any confusion, these are not U.S.

postage stamps. (I put them on envelopes in addition to regular postage.) I make lots of stamps. I thought my fellow corvis might be interested in this one, so at the risk of commercializing The Chronicle, I'm sending a sheet.

The sheets are signed and numbered, printed on gum-backed paper, pin-hole perforated and limited to an edition of 100. Price is \$15 a sheet, postage and handling included within the United States and can be purchased via the Internet or directly from:

Mike Hess  
1014 E. Republican St.  
Seattle WA 98102-5018  
Mh98102@yahoo.com

The *Corvi Chronicle* is published irregularly by corvi who have an interest in or need for doing so for members of The American Society of Crows and Ravens and others. There is no subscription fee, but it is customary and seemly to send contributions to pay for production and mailing. There is a direct connection between contributions, the size of the Chronicle and its frequency of distribution. Those who do not choose to contribute will continue to receive the Chronicle and enjoy all membership privileges. However, they will no doubt suffer a loss of self-esteem and may occasionally be mocked by other corvis.

Members are reminded to make new corvi by duplicating and passing along issues of the Chronicle.

ASCAR has a home page or chat room on the Internet:

<http://www.ascaronline.org/>

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